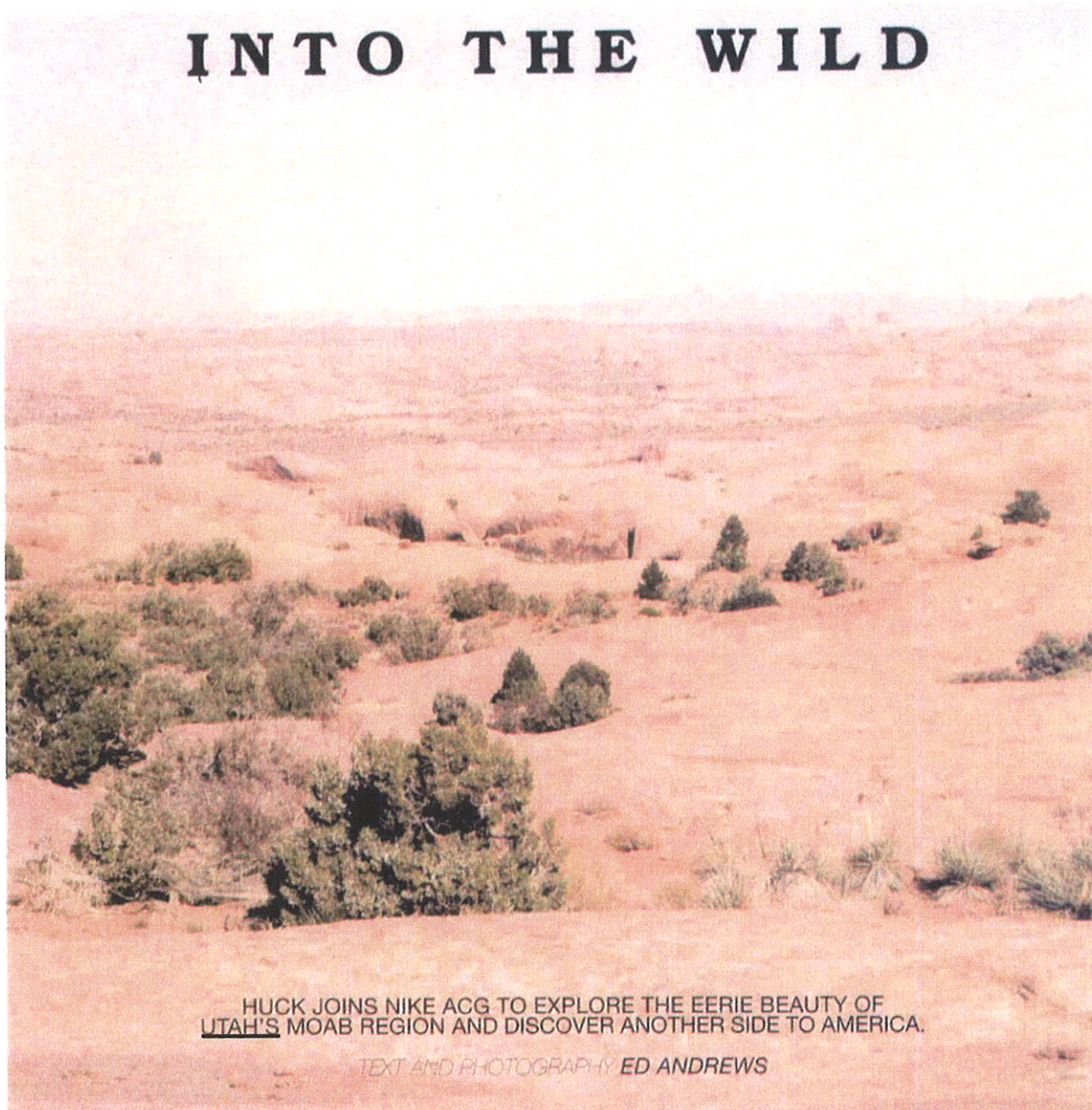




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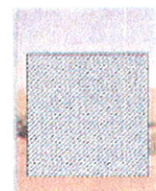
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INTO THE WILD



HUCK JOINS NIKE ACG TO EXPLORE THE EERIE BEAUTY OF
UTAH'S MOAB REGION AND DISCOVER ANOTHER SIDE TO AMERICA.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY **ED ANDREWS**



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As I board the connecting flight in Cincinnati, I am greeted by the thick, pungent smell of grease seeping out of McDonald's bags. The stench clogs my pores and clings in my throat. I sit next to a morbidly obese man wearing a billowing check shirt, jeans and braces. The intercom crunches into life and the air hostess, obligatory fifty-mile smile surgically fixed across her perma-tanned face, appears on the screens overhead. After many a 'It's a federal offence' this and 'By the order of the Department of Homeland Security' that, we are flying. It's four hours to Salt Lake City. This is going to be hell.

But three and a half hours later, as the plane descends into the Mormon capital of the world, something amazing happens. My own prejudice

is overcome by something much more powerful. The desert sunset casts a rich glow across Utah's Wasatch Mountains, illuminating the scorched mountain landscape in fiery reds and oranges and stirring up a rare ethereal pang in this cynical atheist. I can only imagine what the more spiritually susceptible Mormon founders would have felt at this sight. It's truly beautiful – and it's just the start. Over the following days, we head deep into the eastern Utah desert to the spiritual home of the great outdoors, Moab. Perhaps there is more to America than stereotypes dictate – for out in the wild, there exists another place.

DAY ONE.

After a pre-dawn breakfast of pancakes, eggs

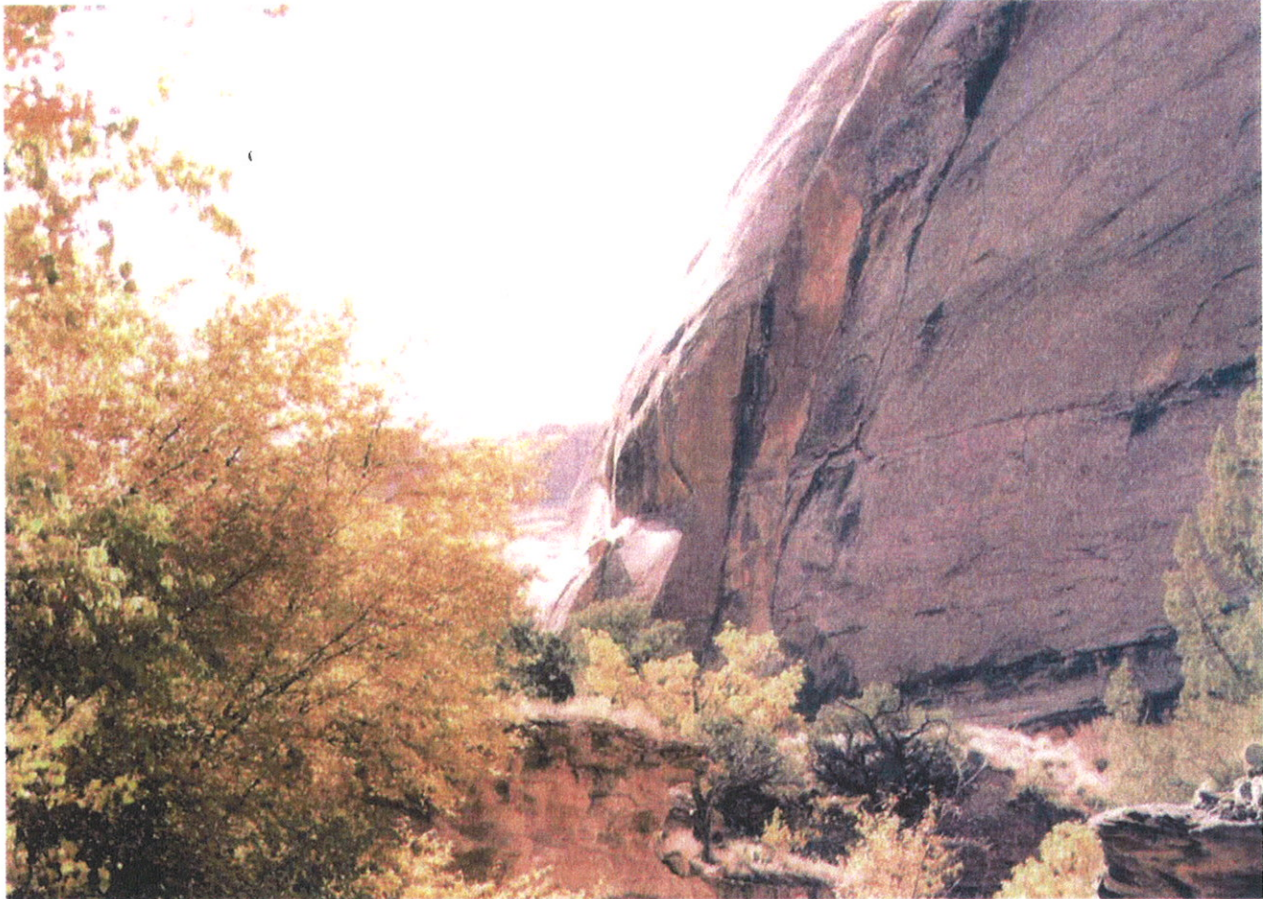
and bacon, we embark on a hike, fully kitted up to endure the rocky desert landscape, roasting sunshine and bitter chill of the night.

The town's scenery has been used by many a Hollywood blockbuster as a backdrop for the 'true' Wild West. Everyone from John Wayne to *Theima* and *Louise* have traipsed the magnificent landscape. The 1950s saw Moab boom from uranium mining, which proved very lucrative at the height of the Cold War. Here and there, the scars of hardrock digging are still visible, with abandoned quarries sadly cut out of the hills.

Nowadays the town is a hub for outdoor sports, and Nike ACG has brought us here to share in its inspiration. Our hike starts just outside of Moab at Negro Bill Canyon – a place, according ▼

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to our guide Erik, that is 'yet to be reached by political correctness'. Beginning by the banks of the Colorado River, the canyon was formed by a natural spring creek that cut down through the soft rock. Cacti, bushes, trees and grass sprout out of the dusty ground by the creek. The autumnal leaves of the trees drop bright yellows and greens against the golden sandstone, producing a spectrum of colour unlike anything I've seen. Juniper bushes waft the scent of gin into the dry air as the sun gets higher in the sky, sending the temperature soaring – but fall into the shadows and you are met with a chill.

Erik stops by a twiggy bush and snaps off a small stem to chew on. The plant, *Ephedra funerea*, is a natural source of ephedrine. It became known

as 'Mormon Tea' when early teetotal settlers boiled up bundles to get that forbidden buzz. Faced with such a harsh environment, and the temperance demanded by their religion, even early pioneers, it seems, needed the odd stimulant.

The path we take along the creek is well trodden, but we are strongly encouraged not to stray from it. While the ground may only appear to be scrub and dirt, it is in fact a rare type of cryptobiotic soil, and the very thing that sustains life on this inhospitable land. To step on it would destroy a delicate structure of nutrients and render it useless for decades to come. After several hours hiking, we make a steady climb out of the canyon and continue across an expansive plateau. Once again, the view is awesome. The La Sal Mountains

sit in the east, sparkling from a light dusting of snow and overlooking the desert that continues past the western horizon.

Later on, we gather around the camp fire as the temperature plummets with sundown, the dry air unable to hold in any heat. Sitting at over 1,000m above sea level, the cold certainly bites hard. I climb into my tent, fully-clothed inside a thermal sleeping bag yet still shivering in the dark.

DAY TWO.

I wake up before dawn. My mouth is bone dry and it takes nearly a whole flask of water to saturate its cracked sides – another reminder of the harsh nature of this environment. I climb up a rocky outcrop and take a seat, quietly enjoying the transformation from

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starlight to sunrise. I snap away with my camera but nothing seems to do this sight justice.

The rest of the morning is spent rolling petrified over steep sand dunes of the Slickrock mountain bike trail – something that turns out to be a combination of exhilarating charges down and gruelling, near-vertical climbs up. After lunch by the Colorado River, we head for The Fiery Furnace – a cluster of sandstone stacks that form a tight maze dotted with pools of hardy flora.

Leaping from rock to rock, scrambling up inclines and crawling through narrow tunnels, we reach a vantage point that reveals the expansive Arches National Park, a collection of over 2,000 natural sandstone arches that has been protected as a National Monument since 1929. It's not difficult

to fathom why. Just being here is invigorating, a life-affirming experience that puts the everyday world into perspective.

Away from civilisation, the twenty-dollar bill that sits in my pocket is completely redundant. There is not a fast food wrapper, television set or drooling, consumer zombie in sight. There is, however, stunning vistas, epic horizons and the most amazing wilderness I have ever seen.

DAY THREE.

I am back at Salt Lake City airport, writing this as I wash down greasy pizza with a bland, watery lager – a consumer once again. Out of the window, the Wasatch Mountains tower on the horizon, the Utah capital sprawling at their base. It sums up the

dichotomy of this intriguing country – a place so afflicted by corporate marketing and commercial fakery and yet host to some of the most spectacular natural settings in the world.

Before this, I myself was unable to look beyond the SUVs and super-size fries – too busy scorning the city to notice the mountains that lay behind. As I prepare to shut down my laptop, some of my misconceptions are packed away with it.

It feels good to realise I may have been wrong ●

SPECIAL THANKS TO NIKE ACG, WHO CELEBRATED THEIR 20TH ANNIVERSARY WITH A TRIP TO MOAB, ONE OF THE KEY INSPIRATIONS FOR NIKE'S ICONIC AIR MOWABB. WWW.NIKEACG.COM

